

Argonne/Department of Energy Community Leaders Round Table

The Community Leaders Round Table is an effort by Argonne National Laboratory and the U.S. Department of Energy's Chicago Office to establish and continue communication with its neighbors.

Started approximately nine years ago, the Round Table is exactly what its name implies – a forum for leaders from the community to discuss issues and noteworthy topics with leadership from the Laboratory, the Department and the University of Chicago. The group takes the place of a Site Specific Advisory Board with these advantages, it:

- has focused on a wide range of issues instead of being restricted to environmental issues;
- is operated for nominal costs (less than \$10,000 per year) compared to an SSAB (costs ranging up to \$500,000 per year);
- avoids many of the organizational issues of an SSAB because the invited organizations appoint their own representatives and there are no CLRT “officers”; and
- has been nimble enough to anticipate and address issues before they become problems.

Over the years, the topics to be discussed have changed dramatically. In the early years, the group wanted to discuss environmental topics – exclusively – including waste storage, waste disposal, solid waste management unit clean-up, nuclear waste (TRU) disposal, groundwater contamination on and off site, etc. For the past few years, the group has turned its attention to science programs, including demonstrations of:

- ice slurries, biochips and pluripotent blood to aid in medical applications;
- fuel cells and other transportation/automotive developments;
- phytoremediation research to remediate volatile organics;
- the environmental condition of the Alaska pipeline; and
- education and other programs which could aid the local community .

Set-up

Following the pattern of an earlier advisory group, Argonne/DOE decided to invite every organization in the surrounding area to send a representative to the group. Nearly 200 invitations were sent to:

- federal, state and local elected representatives;
- staffers from these government entities
- homeowners groups;
- environmental groups; and
- local school boards.

These addressees are regularly invited to meetings; and given updates, web sites to visit and contact information to help them stay apprised of site activities. Over the years, additional community leaders have indicated their interest and then been invited to participate. Media do not regularly cover the meetings, though they are notified.

Operation

The group is moderated by a representative from the Illinois League of Women Voters. At each meeting, the community leaders decide what topics they would like to hear about at the next meeting (usually following recommendations from Argonne/DOE staff). For approximately five years, the group met monthly. More recently, the group has met quarterly.

At each 2-hour meeting, Lab and DOE managers give approximately 5-10 minutes of updates on what is happening at the site. Following that, there are one or two focus topics and a tour of the pertinent facilities.

Benefits

- CLRT has built a sense of communal purpose among all involved in helping further the research environment and the research itself.
- CLRT has benefited the Lab and DOE by providing a forum to communicate ideas and plans to members of the community and receive their counsel on ways to communicate with our other neighbors.
- CLRT has allowed the Lab and DOE to listen to the community in an environment of low animosity and high trust – and the corollary for the community members.
- CLRT has allowed Lab and DOE representatives to discuss proposed projects with the community leaders and resolve potential community relations issues before they become problems. This has allowed the Lab to initiate new research activities including the Center for Nanoscale Materials, the import and examination of spent nuclear fuel and other smaller projects, with the knowledge and consent of the community. This has also allowed the site to be used for other research projects like the Ricketts Laboratory
- CLRT has provided our neighbors the opportunity to interact personally with DOE, Lab and University management – raising issues and concerns, and developing trust. These neighbors have then served as ambassadors to the rest of the community.